



Job Connection, Inc.
Connecting People to Work & Community

EXHIBIT 385
DATE 1/18/07
HB 2

January 16, 2007

Chairman Clark and members of the Committee:

My name is Rita Schilling. I am the Director of Job Connection, Inc. in Billings. We provide supported living and supported employment services to people. I was one of the first social workers hired by the State of Montana to bring people out of the institution in the 1970's. I am well aware of how much more guts we had than actual plans back then. We were sure anything was better than the conditions we had heard about at the institution, and we set up an under funded system. I have been amazed and humbled over the years as I have watched the progress that people with disabilities have made in living productive and independent lives as long as they had the right combination of support and training. I have been thrilled as we have worked with the business community in Billings to help people become part of the workforce and earn money to help support themselves.

For people to have adequate services, however, we must have a workforce that is interested in helping people with difficult challenges to manage the risk of living and working as independently and as safely as possible. People with disabilities need knowledgeable, reliable, energetic and creative help in order to achieve their potential. The toll on people's lives and agencies' ability to manage operations when workers are constantly turning over is astronomical.

We cannot expect workers to want to enter our field and certainly not to stay in the field unless we, as agencies, have something to offer them in return. That something needs to be more than feeling good because they are helping others. I appreciate the DPHHS request to raise the rate structure and the Governor's support of part of that request. However, it is still too low. We need a rate structure based on a hourly staff wage that is competitive so that we can encourage people to come in our door to learn about this field and to offer them raises to stay. This is an ideal time to set up a career ladder with pay raises as our state is trying to adopt the College of Direct Support Professionals curriculum for our agencies. However in offer a competitive wage in most communities we need to have a rate structure based on at least \$ 10.50 an hour so that we can offer a range of \$9.00 to \$12.00 for pay. We would be close to offering comparable wages to nursing homes with this type of wage structure.

A while ago I contacted the Vo-tech school in Billings to see if they would be interested in helping to provide some training for people to enter our field. There is so much to learn and it would be helpful if people had some training before they started working. I felt if people had a certificate from the college it would add some credibility to our field. As soon as I mentioned the wages, however, they told me that they were only interested in developing classes in fields where people could make at least \$12.00 an hour. Interestingly enough, a man I know who pushes carts for Wal-Mart. He is making \$11.80 an hour. Yet we have based the rate for many types of services in DD on paying people an average of \$8.56 an hour, and these workers are responsible for every aspect of people's lives.

As a provider I have some problems with the rate system as it has been designed. I think we needed more provider input and analysis of some of the data and information the state and consultants used to form the system. The last couple of years have been very hard on agencies because none of us have been sure we would be able to survive the changes it is requiring. Our agency provides some supported living but mostly supported employment. We received the lowest rate per person in the state for supported employment from the state in the old system. Yet as an agency we decided we were better off hiring a few highly paid staff and keeping them than hiring a lot of lower paid staff in order to accomplish our work. As the state has developed most of the system on quantity rather than quality of workforce, we were never sure we would be able to survive the change. This is a difficult thing to have gone through. The state has funded the staffing for supported employment at a higher rate and so I am now expecting Job Connection to be able to continue our work in supported employment.. However in supported living we are not able to hire staff and pay operations at the levels the state has established. We have had 3 people ask to change to our agency for supported living services but we have not picked them up because we know we cannot hire the type of staffing they need at the current rate level. We would just experience the same problems as the agency they are now with.

There are still a number of problems to be worked out for all lines of service. Providers and the state have just formed a work group to work together to find solutions for some of these problems. I am hoping that we are both working in good faith.

Without added resources so that providers can fully staff their agencies, this rate structure could easily lead to very good agencies that have developed a wealth of knowledge in this field having to close their doors. Families and clients have put their faith in us for caring for very vulnerable people. Our state needs to live up to that faith.

Submitted by
Rita Schilling
Director
Job Connection.

